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AUTHOR Werder, Carmen M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the myriad difficulties in getting rid of an unsatisfactory writing examination in place at Western Washington University. First, the paper provides background information on how and why the exam (the Junior Writing Exam) came to be adopted in the 1980s (as a diagnostic test only) and explains what the exam was meant to examine. Then, it recounts how the examination became a required pass in 1991, with a significant failure rate of 40% by 1992. The writing program directors tried to improve instructional support services and instructor training since the students who failed became demoralized and bitter. The drain on Writing Center resources became alarming, and the center's personnel were desperate for a solution. This "rising junior" test was finally replaced with a different type of exam, one that was not decontextualized and lacking validity but, instead, an authentic writing task. It finds that, instead of concentrating on fixing or eliminating an exam, educators at Western Washington are now launched on establishing an interdisciplinary community of inquiry involving faculty, administrators, and students as part of the Carnegie Campus Conversations Program. (NKA)

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by Carmen M. Werder

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THE WICKED OLD WITCH IS DEAD: GETTING RID OF A FLAWED WRITING EXAM

Carmen Werder

When Richard Haswell e-mailed me after last year's 4Cs and asked if I was interested in joining a panel to discuss mandated writing assessment – to speak from my experience and success - I was pleased at the prospects of a forum in which to talk about our campus's recent victory over a rising junior exam. Still flushed from the triumph, I accepted the invitation. Mainly, I just wanted to understand better exactly what had accounted for that victory. I would like to think our success in displacing the flawed test was because I single-handedly overpowered the creature. Though God knows I tried to sneak up on it in the night and smother it, I know that its death resulted from the work of many people who exerted a lot of hard work and endured. But hard work and endurance don't necessarily spell success. What strategies *did* we use that worked? I have spent the last two years trying to figure that out. So I come to you, not with some master plan for success, but with an exploratory analysis of the case of our test's demise – The Case of the Wicked Old Witch from Western Washington University - in the hopes that it will be suggestive of how we composition folks can, in fact, take back the test. Though the Oz metaphor here is meant to be playful, and does highlight some serious recommendations I will mention later, I do not intend for it to trivialize this topic. Getting rid of our writing test is the most difficult thing I have ever attempted in academe.

Let me begin by describing the context which prompted the creation of our test because it came into existence initially – not by legislative mandate – but prompted by an offer from the corporate sector. In the early 80's representatives from a corporation that hired many of our graduates approached the administration offering to pay for remedial

writing help for them. It turns out that while they found our graduates attractive employees in many ways, they were concerned about their writing skills. Well, you can imagine the administrative scurrying that occurred in response. A campus writing committee was appointed to address the problem, and they decided to implement an upper-division writing proficiency requirement. At the time Western students had only one required writing course, English 101, as part of their general education requirements. So the plan was to require a second writing course at the upper level, preferably in the major, which would serve as a graduation requirement. However, the Committee decided there needed to be some kind of screening device to determine whether students were ready to benefit from the instruction to be provided by this WP course. In part, they were concerned about the large number of students who transfer into Western. While there was no actual data that transfer students had inferior writing skills, there was a widespread assumption that they were not as proficient as our native students. The Committee's general sentiment was that there needed to be some kind of instrument at the junior level to *catch* transfers as well as to *catch* any native students who were not ready to proceed to the WP course.

They recommended implementation of a "rising junior exam" so called because it was intended for students to pass as they moved from sophomore to junior status. And it was also a *barrier* writing exam because students had to take it before enrolling in a WP course. Together, the test and the course would constitute the writing proficiency requirement for graduation. In 1983, they instituted the Junior Writing Exam as an informational, diagnostic exercise only; in other words, students were required to take it, but not necessarily to pass it. The idea was that those who received an "Unsatisfactory"

would seek out remedial help in the Writing Center or in a 200-level writing course that had been created with the test in mind. So the Junior Writing Exam (the JWE) didn't start out to be a mean thing, but rather a means for students to obtain information about their writing ability before moving on to a writing proficiency course.

The JWE was a two-part test. The first portion was a 45-item multiple-choice identification of sentence level errors; it required just over 50% (a score of 23) to pass, and it was graded by a scantron. The second part was a writing sample, a one-paragraph summary of a 500-600 word passage drawn from readings on various topics; it was rated either Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory based on a set of primary traits generated by the writing committee, and it was evaluated by a cadre of faculty graders from across the disciplines.

The JWE received negligible attention until the fall of 1991 when it became a required pass. Up to this point, since the test had been merely advisory, students generally did not take it seriously. While some students undoubtedly did look at their test scores and sought out more instruction, many simply went through the motions as evidenced by a growing number of summaries which were not paragraphs, but more in the vein of editorial comments on the test itself – test graffiti actually. One could argue that such students were rhetorically astute considering the summary's contrived rhetorical purpose. Truth is, it didn't really matter what they wrote on the summary – just that they took the exam. Those who did take the summary seriously and failed it could seek additional information by making an appointment with the Assistant Director of the Writing Center to review their exam, but there was little incentive for students to do so. Whether students failed or passed, they simply received overall scores, no specific

information on how to improve. In the late 1980's, with increasing pressure from our state legislature to focus more on assessment, our Higher Education Coordinating Board formalized this concern with a mandate to all state baccalaureate schools which stipulated intermediate writing assessment.

When the JWE became a required pass in 1991, it became what we now know as "high stakes" writing assessment because students needed to pass it not only before enrolling in a writing proficiency course, but in order to graduate. Soon the test assumed a life of its own with a growing appetite for consuming more resources.

In the fall of 1992, a neophyte in writing assessment and a doctoral candidate in rhetoric and comp, I assumed the part-time position as Assistant Director of the Writing Center, with my sole responsibility to respond to the students who failed the test and needed remedial help. Dorothy plunked down in Kansas all right, but without the benefit of Toto and friends. Naively thinking that this position was about writing instruction, I began walking what was to become a long and windy road.

By the time I entered the scene, the failure rate on the test overall had become significant - averaging about 40%, with the failure rate on the summary portion hitting an all time high at 54% in the previous quarter. The administration had increased the Assistant Director position to ¾ time in an effort to respond to the large number of students who had failed the test. The high fail rate was compounded by the fact that students could take the exam only once each quarter, so if they failed one or both parts, they could not re-take the test until the next quarter. The JWE was quickly becoming a bottleneck.

After reviewing the disturbingly high failure rate and attending my first scoring session, I began a campaign to improve the test itself, focusing first on improving the training of graders. Instead of viewing the summary simply as an indicator of whether or not writers could profit from more writing instruction, graders tended to evaluate the summaries as exit tests. For example, if the summary had evidence of imprecise word choice or prejudicial misspellings, graders tended to award it a U, never mind the established criteria. I watched a "horn" effect – a perverse halo – with graders punishing stylistic infelicities with failing marks. Citing the need for high expectations, many graders vented all their frustrations about weak writing proficiency – not just about a particular student's summary – but all over the world.

Concerned, I volunteered to help conduct future grading sessions and made some changes. An evaluation rubric was stamped on each summary sheet for graders to check off. Before scoring, graders reviewed a packet of sample summaries which had already been scored and glossed. There was little or no room for faculty discussion. The stakes had become too high. These changes in the training sessions did result in increasing the pass rate, but there was much grumbling that we had lowered our standards.

At the same time, I tried to improve the instructional support services because the test results had such a demoralizing effect on students who failed. I began by asking graders to use "S-U" scoring on the tests themselves because it was much easier for students who failed the summary and came in for consultation to listen my recommendations if they saw a U and the scoring grid on their test sheets than to be greeted with a big "F." I created a summary writing workshop that was offered several times a week through the Writing Center, and videotaped for our off-campus sites, and

which further helped increase the pass rate. The Writing Center program manager and I beefed up the JWE study packets providing sample tests, answers and model summaries, test-taking strategies, and additional resources. We even rewrote test summary passages so that they included explicit thesis statements. We stocked the Center with sample passages for practice and trained the writing assistants to teach to both parts of the test. The Writing Center became the JWE Center. And for awhile I thought we were making headway: by 1994 the pass rate had stabilized at 75-80%. But student resentment against the test continued to run high. And I was so busy trying to keep up with individual test consultations and the myriad details involved with sustaining the exam, that there was little or no time to reflect or consider the test's implications. Eventually, though, I began to look *beyond* the test.

Not only had the Writing Center become aligned with all the negative response from students who had failed the exam, but also the limited nature of the exam had served to convey a reductive sense of writing with serious curricular implications. Writing became equated with the JWE which became equated with finding errors and writing one-paragraph summaries. While this notion of "writing" bore little relationship to the writing as critical inquiry model that we were trying to inculcate into our general education writing courses, the isolated summary write became common in the first year writing course and beyond. About this time, another logistic nightmare occurred: The writing committee decided to implement a computer block on the registration of students who had not passed the test by the time they had accrued 120 credits – a credit block that could only be removed by coming to the Writing Center and completing a contract form committing to certain activities before the block could be lifted. Angry because they

could not register for any classes (not simply a WP course), students became even more hostile toward the exam.

While I was beside myself by now because of the drain on Writing Center resources, I was equally alarmed by the harm the test was doing to students' attitudes about writing. Eventually, the moment of truth came when a young Hispanic woman, a senior, who had failed the multiple-choice part of the exam four times came to my office to re-take that part of the test. Since she had such high test anxiety, I got permission to administer the test individually in an effort to calm her down. It was the first week of June and she showed up with her graduation paraphernalia in anticipation of the ceremony the following weekend. Now I was anxious. What if she failed the test again? After she finished, I counted up her correct answers and much to our mutual relief, she scored the requisite 23 in order to pass. I confess I don't know what I would have done had she failed it, especially knowing how little the 23 meant. I do know that as she left my office jubilant in what I saw as a hollow victory, I had to question how we had helped this student learn. What perverse sense of writing gains was she leaving with? And how could this test be justified? I vowed to shift attention away from the test itself to the institutional structure that was keeping it alive.

I turned first to the campus writing committee. While I had regularly attended and worked with this group, I was not a member of the committee. And my increasingly vocal critique of the test had begun to incur the wrath of a supervisor who had helped institute it and who was an ex-officio member of the committee. While I acknowledged that the test had reflected the best assessment thinking available when instituted, I suggested how it was not serving students or faculty or writing or writing instruction, but

only its insatiable hunger for more resources. With enormous relief, I read about the problems with rising junior exams in Ed White's *Teaching and Assessing Writing* – sure that he was describing our test - and tried to insinuate his concerns into the committee. But to no avail. Finally, when Brian Huot's CCCs piece "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment" was published in Dec. 1996, I promptly copied it and sent it around to the whole committee - sure that his cogent argument on the need to link an assessment instrument with writing pedagogy would certainly persuade them. Again, they seemed unable to conceive of life without the JWE and seemed confident that it was better than nothing. My blatant criticism of the test was causing friction and, soon, I received a curt memo from my supervisor advising me not to attend the writing committee meetings anymore. Up to now, I hope you have heard a cautionary tale. Now to the part about success.

Making Friends with the Tin Man, the Scare Crow, the Lion, and all the Munchkins

By now, I was desperate. Eliminating a test that has assumed a life of its own can require enormous energy and can benefit from combining resources (brains, heart, and courage). In my expanded full-time position as Assoc. Director of the Writing Center, I replaced my JWE consultation duties with a focus on writing in the general education program and began consulting with the gen ed committee. Together, we proposed a three-part writing initiative: to institute a second writing course at the lower level, as part of our general education requirements; to endorse the writing links (the pairing of a 200-level writing course with courses in the disciplines), and to establish a task force to explore the creation of a University Writing Program.

This task force included members from the English Dept., the Writing Center, as well as faculty from other department interested in writing instruction. This time, I was an official member. In addition to bringing a writing program consultant to campus and securing her recommendations for a writing program, the Task Force also sponsored cross campus visits to inform all departments about the writing proposals and to seek feedback. We also held area focus groups to discuss the findings. In the course of those departmental and area conversations, concerns about the JWE emerged. In fact, a faculty member from the College of Business suggested replacing the exam with a writing points requirement, whereby courses throughout the curriculum that provided writing instruction would carry not only course credit, but also writing points, so students could be required to earn so many writing points as part of their coursework. In this way, assessment would occur in the context of courses where it belonged. Eventually, it was this writing points idea that seeded the motion that successfully replaced the JWE.

Drawing the Curtain on the Wizard

Just as the big scary voice of the Great Oz came from a little scrawny man, so frequently does the mandate behind an exam reveal more rumor than actuality. Find out what the mandate actually says can be quite revealing. By the time the cross-departmental meetings were happening, I had become a member of the Assessment Advisory Committee. When one of its members referred to the oft repeated mantra -We really have no choice but to have some kind of intermediate writing test because our state legislature has mandated it - I decided to check out the actual language of the mandate with someone I had met from the Higher Education Coordinating Board. Low and behold the mandate that everyone had been citing these many years was actually very

generic. It said nothing about schools needing to test all students individually at the intermediate level. Only that there needed to be intermediate writing assessment.

Getting Out of Kansas and Oz

When we are feeling helpless, we tend to keep going back to the same old place. Physically and intellectually going to another site can create a new perspective and provide new options. I turned to my neighbors to the east – Washington State University. I don't think that Rich Haswell and Susan Wyche who were responsible for designing the portfolio assessment at WSU when they were there even know that they are a part of my success story. But they were. After attending an assessment colloquium at WSU, I reported back to the Assessment Committee. While they were skeptical about taking on a portfolio system, they began to see how the JWE didn't have to be the only way to do intermediate writing assessment. Together, we drafted a motion to eliminate the test, which the Assessment Committee passed and forwarded to the writing committee as an advisory recommendation. While the EWC ended up being split on the motion, committee support for the test was clearly waning. And the Assessment Committee dialogue had also gained the attention of the Director of our Office of Assessment and Institutional Testing who had been skeptical about dismantling the test, but was beginning to see how we might interpret the legislative mandate differently if we chose to.

As a result of his inclusion in the conversation, the Testing Center ran some data about the exam which revealed some useful pieces of information: 1) Transfers performed at generally the same rate as native students and scored even a bit higher on the objective part and 2) the level of difficulty for the objective part was ridiculously low.

And before a psychometric expert from the Psych Dept. could convince the Assessment Director that the solution was simply to write a "harder" test, I brought in information to show how the JWE was flawed because it was not an authentic writing task in that it was totally decontextualized and therefore lacked validity. This time, the information from Huot's article about a new model of writing assessment was heard.

Following the Yellow Brick Road

Successfully dismantling a flawed exam may well result from indirection. The road may lead away from a focus on the writing assessment instrument per se toward larger initiatives. The connection with the Director of Testing led us beyond our campus committees when in the spring of 1998 we were invited to participate in a statewide writing project involving all six public, four-year schools as part of a pilot project to see if scoring writing samples from seniors might serve as an accountability measure. In response to our State Legislatures' desire to find ways to measure institutional effectiveness, the assessment coordinators had suggested the plan and invited composition faculty from each school to respond. While we were resistant at first, we participated the first year and were pleasantly surprised to see how useful the discussions were for getting at what we value most in learning outcomes. We are still piloting the project and are not sure if it will ever serve as an accountability measure, but has generated a discipline-base rubric and suggested ways to enhance faculty development efforts. So far, we have been able to use what began as an accountability proposal to further assessment efforts at our own schools.

In the context of this expanding conversation both on and off campus, in spring 1998, a sub-group of the writing committee approached me to help craft a new motion to

eliminate the test. After a number of meetings and multiple revisions, this sub-committee proposed that the test be replaced with more writing instruction, specifically in the form of the writing points plan that had emerged in our focus groups. I must say that it was with a great deal of pleasure that I accepted the writing committee's invitation to speak to the proposal when it went before our Academic Coordinating Commission for review in the spring of 1998. It passed unanimously and was ratified by the Faculty Senate two weeks later, again unanimously. The JWE was administered for the last time two years ago this month.

While the writing points plan is still under study and the second general education writing course has been delayed pending additional resources, the elimination of the JWE has afforded us the space to address writing assessment *together* in a broad base way. As a result of the expanding conversations about assessment in general, we now have a solid alliance between the Assessment Office and our new Center for Instructional Innovation (CII). Now in a reinvented position as Director of Interdisciplinary Curriculum and Assessment, I am working with the CII to create campus resource teams that will work with departments in designing learning outcomes, with special emphasis on our FIGs (Freshmen Interest Groups). On our campus, writing assessment has become a much more situated activity – as part of a larger enterprise – and not simply as a one-size-fits-all writing test. I suspect that the writing program at the University of Missouri at Columbia has been so successful because Marty Townsend and her colleagues have understood the importance of this kind of situating.

As part of our campus's extended conversation, we have discovered an especially influential national ally in the Carnegie Scholarship of Teaching community. As Jean

MacGregor urges, we need "to think of assessment as a process rather than a particular technique or an instrument" and calls for creating "communities of inquiry where assessment is part of a larger discussion of learning." Instead of concentrating on fixing or eliminating an exam, we are now launched on establishing an interdisciplinary community of inquiry involving faculty, administrators, and students as part of the Carnegie Campus Conversations Program.

Killing the Wicked Witch

It is tempting to think we can make a bad assessment instrument better. For a long time, we tried to fix the test. But if a test is wickedly flawed, such as completely decontextualizing the writing task, fiddling with surface qualities will not fix the problem. While not as simple as clicking our heels together, we have managed to eliminate the test and institutionalize assessment in a better way. As Inga Baird Hill emphasizes in a recent issue of *Assessment Update*, "To achieve true success in the long Run, universities must become learning organizations....Universities themselves must become learners." While we have miles to go before we sleep, I think our university is beginning to learn and to commit to memory that assessment must be at the center of that enterprise.

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